

Letter to a Young Writer

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In Part Three of this series, Edward Hirsch celebrates the pendulous life of the poet: from arrogance to uncertainty, from misstep to breakthrough. Hirsch emphasizes the sustaining force of reading and the need to be initiated into one's own work by the work of others.—The Editors

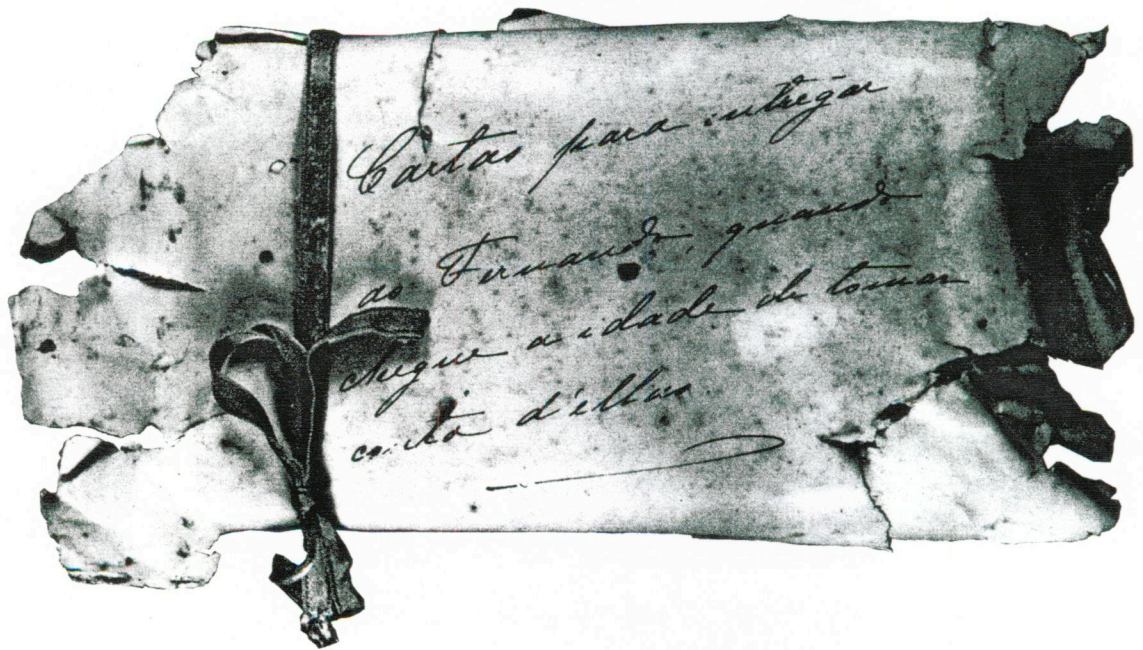
I've been thinking about writing to you for weeks, but I've resisted because I know your path will be your own, as it must be. What good is advice? But finally, this evening, I could see myself again at twenty—with all the arrogance and uncertainty of youth, the high hopes, the terrible doubts (which do not recede), the wild enthusiasms—and suddenly I envied you everything, even the missteps, the mistakes, but especially the breakthroughs, the gifts. Poetry is a splendid country, and I wish I could pledge myself to it again for the first time....

The Muse likes sacrifices, and I remember with what desperate eagerness I was ready to give up everything for the first thrills of inspiration. I would do it all again in a heartbeat. I recall every step of the way, of course, but especially the extravagant fits of discovery. Those were the high times of youth, of mispronouncing names and schooling intuitions, of reading feverishly through the night. I remember, for example, the morning I discovered Lorca, and the afternoon I found Vallejo, and the night I was first enthralled by Rilke. I remember the consuming joy of reading Hart Crane—I stomped around getting drunk on his words—and the pleasure of getting lost in the associative drift of John Keats, and the mounting excitement of diving into Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*. Everything was fresh to me—I was practically a blank slate when it came to previous poetry—and I was at least lucky enough to know that I needed to be initiated into my own work by the work of others.

Learn everything you can. Study the great models, imitate and do otherwise. Internalize your craft so that you can serve or surmount it, so that you can become, in the end, that strangest of creatures: yourself. Identity is fluid. I myself have always been heartened by models of mutuality and presence that show us the poet's need for other material, even for guidance. There is something abject and beautiful about the way that Dante summons Virgil to his side to lead his pilgrim self through the inferno to the gateway of paradise; or the way that Blake summons Milton; Yeats summons Blake; Roethke summons Yeats ("I take this cadence from a man named Yeats, / I take it and I give it back again"). I'm struck by the way that the young T. S. Eliot entered poetry carrying Laforgue under his arm and Baudelaire in his heart, by the way that Ezra Pound entered poetry not alone but with a self-acknowledged dependence upon the Provençal poets, whom he remade for the modern world. I have always believed that a self-directed artistic development is a life well lived.

Writing poetry will, I suspect, become a way of reporting back to yourself about yourself. That's what it has been for me. But that is only one part of it. An even greater joy is the authentic fulfillment of becoming a maker. Poetry must ever be recalled and remade, and, if you are lucky, it will fall to you to help remake it. I hold out a hand to you. I wish for you what I have wished and continue to wish for myself—to be able to participate in poetry, to honor and take a place in it.

Edward Hirsch



Letters inscribed: "Letters to be given to Fernando [Pessoa] when he's of age to take care of them." Photograph: Courtesy of Assifio & Alvim.